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SUBJECT: UGANDA: Parliamentarians Concerned about Immigrants  
Encroaching on Ugandan Rights

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 16, 2007, RefCoord met with parliamentarians Stephen Mukitale and Beatrice Mpairwe of Bulisa district, which borders the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). RefCoord asked for the meeting to determine how IDP and refugee settlements impacted the local economy. However, the legislators quickly agreed that neither IDPs nor encamped refugees presented a problem for the district. They argued that their district, which borders on the DRC and Lake Albert, was the home of an overwhelming number of Congolese nationals living outside the refugee camps. The presence of Congolese, long tolerated, has now inspired a peaceful, but heated land dispute between local fisherman and undocumented aliens. The parliamentarians want to change the refugee or immigration laws to deal with the immigrants. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Stephan Mukitale and Beatrice Mpairwe represent the new district of Bulisa in Uganda. The two parliamentarians are new to legislative politics. However, they are enthusiastic representatives for their new district. DRCongo, Lake Albert, two national parks, and Acholiland hem in Bulisa. Land is in short supply and conflict surrounds the new district. Mpairwe and Mukitale blame the national refugee law for their troubles and they mean to change the way the law views immigrants and refugees.

¶3. (SBU) According to the two parliamentarians, Uganda has historically been too open to "refugees." Neighbors move freely over the borders, and the government is slow to direct these people to designated refugee sites. They complained that the international community--specifically UNHCR--refuses to step in to take charge of these arrivals. When RefCoord asked if these arrivals were actually refugees, or immigrants, the parliamentarians were visibly annoyed.

¶4. (SBU) The legislators complained that what they called refugees from Congo have been historically crossing the border with Uganda since the early days of Congo's independence. Each military or economic upheaval in the region has brought with it large numbers of Congolese immigrants to Uganda. Both legislators acknowledged that the immigrants were not de jure refugees. However, Mukitale stressed that the immigrants came to Uganda to escape persecution, and remained without any legal status. Now, Mukitale claims, as many as 45 percent of the district's population trace their origins to Congo.

¶5. (SBU) Refugees or not, these immigrants put a strain on local resources, according to the parliamentarians. The

foreign-born arrivals compete with locals for access to fishing and land rights. Those who have been in Uganda since the 1950's lay claim to full rights of citizenship, MP Mpairwe claimed, with out the benefit of applying for those rights. Peaceful but heated land disputes have arisen between Congolese and Ugandans. Land ownership in Bulisa is based on communally held, clan rights that are often undocumented. According to the parliamentarians, ethnic Congolese have made formal claims to lands with the government. Locals accuse national authorities of favoring these new arrivals, who use corruption and influence peddling to secure rights to which they have no legal claim.

¶6. (SBU) Livelihood issues have also caused friction in the district. Ethnic Rwandans, expelled from neighboring countries, wandered across the border from Congo with livestock. These herdsmen settled on traditional farming land. Congolese fishermen settled on the Ugandan shores of Lake Albert, and compete with locals for the depleting resources of the Lake. The Congolese refuse to adhere to national restrictions on size or volume of the catch, over fishing the lake.

¶7. (SBU) The national parks limit access to arable land. In the 14 years since 1994, Congolese, especially those related to the Hutus of Rwanda, came over the border in increasing numbers. Those who have been in Uganda since the 1950's help the new arrivals settle in and maintain a sense of community that increases their economic and political power in contrast to the traditional fishing tribes of Uganda.

¶8. (SBU) To offset this relative strength of the immigrants, the parliamentarians see two choices: 1) the GoU should term all ethnic Congolese and Rwandans who arrived in Uganda after 1994 as refugees and move them, by force, to refugee settlements; 2) UNHCR should begin a program to assist the district as a refugee impacted area. The legislators plan to propose some form of legislation that would address the legal status of recent undocumented immigrants. They say that other districts have similar problems and might support some change in either the immigration law or refugee law to secure the rights of Uganda citizens.

BROWNING